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To cite this article: Kerstin von Brömssen, Heinz Ivkovits & Graeme Nixon (2020) Religious literacy in the curriculum in compulsory education in Austria, Scotland and Sweden - a three-country policy comparison, Journal of Beliefs & Values, 41:2, 132-149, DOI: [10.1080/13617672.2020.1737909](https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2020.1737909)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2020.1737909>



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Published online: 17 Mar 2020.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Religious literacy in the curriculum in compulsory education in Austria, Scotland and Sweden - a three-country policy comparison

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ABSTRACT

This article presents analyses of curricula in religious education (RE) for public schools in Austria, Scotland, and Sweden. A curricula is the plan that outlines the goals, content and outcomes in education. A critical discourse analysis approach (CDA) is used to explore how each national RE curricula constructs (a) the aims, status and purpose of state-maintained RE (b) the teaching and learning objectives, and contents, and (c) what skills and attitudes the processes of learning aim to develop; together, these can be considered to construct students' religious literacy in the curricula. Theoretical frameworks are from curriculum studies, as well as from literacy studies, with the aim of deepening the knowledge on RE, as well as the discussion on religious literacies from various national curriculum contexts. The analysis shows that although the curricula focus on the same topic, namely RE, they rely on different conceptions of curriculum, as well as on various forms of religious literacy.

KEYWORDS

Religious education;
religious literacy; curriculum;
curriculum theory

Introduction

Issues regarding the relevance, purpose, and teaching of religious education (RE) are being discussed in many parts of the world (Conroy 2016; Dinham and Francis 2015; Dinham and Shaw 2017; Franken 2017; Franken and Loobuyck 2011; Jones and Sheffield 2009; Kuusisto, Poulter, and Kallioniemi 2016; Wielzen and Ter Avest 2017). This can be understood as due to the shifting social landscapes, with an increasing religious and cultural diversity due to migration, but also because of the processes of secularisation, individualisation, and new forms of media interactions. These developments in different political, social and cultural arena contribute to changes of mindset, morals, lifestyles and, as it seems, fragmented knowledge of the world (von Brömssen 2016; Pring 2018).

In education in general, these changes in society have raised concerns regarding educational practice and, among other things, the importance of personal experience

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and reflection, the role of community, the need for authenticity, the value of emotion and creativity, the call for inclusion and differentiation in teaching, and the education of the whole person (Carr 2003; Dalton et al. 2019; Peters 1995). Some writers have even argued that pedagogy is dead and the educational goal that remains in the postmodern era seems to be performance (Farrero and Torrano 2017).

Also, in society at large, issues related to a ‘cohesive society’ and ‘extremism’ have given rise to heated debates on so-called confessional and non-confessional education, as well as public and faith schools (Lövheim and Stenmark 2020; Pring 2018).

However, many countries in today’s Europe have various curricula¹ for RE in various forms, either on a national or on a regional level. As teaching is deeply embedded in a nation’s historical, social and cultural context, these curricula are constructed differently in different parts of Europe, and they are used by teachers and headteachers in different ways. Some nations have a strong input regulation through highly normative curricula and some use output regulation through tests/exams and inspections; others emphasise deregulation by affording schools and teachers space and time for local decision-making over the curriculum, while others have some sort of a mixture of the above (Kuiper and Berkvens 2013). Thus, it is interesting to explore what aims and underlying principles are formulated in the curricula of various European national contexts for the subject RE. The aim of the present study is to analyse curricula for RE from three different countries – Austria, Scotland, and Sweden – and explore what kind of religious literacy is enunciated.

Purpose and research questions

Our analysis of the three curricula in RE revolves around the following questions:

- (1) What are the aims, status and purpose(s) of state-maintained RE?
- (2) What are the teaching and learning objectives, and contents of RE?
- (3) What skills and competences is RE imagined to develop?
- (4) What attitudes and dispositions (if any) are students encourage to develop or express?

We believe that these four questions can help us understand what kind of religious literacy is constructed through each of the curricula in the three different national contexts. Even though the subjects are called RE, sometimes with some complementary terms, the national contexts vary and earlier research has shown that the subject of RE in Europe differs significantly (Franken and Loobuyck 2011; Jackson et al. 2007; Rothgangel, Jäggle, and Schlag 2014; Rothgangel, Jackson, and Jäggle 2014; Rothgangel, Skeie, and Jäggle 2014). However, no research according to our knowledge has critically engaged with the curricula from the three contexts in a close reading with the lenses of curriculum theory and religious literacy, to explore what kind of religious literacy is constructed in each of the curricula. Our aim is to bring new understandings of the RE subject and to engage in the international debate and development on the RE subject in Europe. Our argument is that the discussion concerning RE is frequently flawed because there are various ways to construct a RE curriculum, not only within the binary of denominational or non-denominational.

Theoretical framework

The questions above relate to general curriculum theoretical issues such as what (or whose) knowledge is considered legitimate, and also about what cultural, religious or linguistic groups are included or excluded from education (cf. Englund, Forsberg, and Sundberg 2012, 8). Schools and performed education are agents of the dominant society and, as such, they reflect the underlying cultural patterns of that society. Curricula generally focus on the selection and organisation of specific knowledge, competences and behaviours to fit the particular needs of the student and the unique operational structure of the school. Thus, the importance of curriculum studies cannot be overestimated in social science, as McEneaney and Meyer (2000, 189) underline.

As stated above, curricula are important because they formulate the framework for subjects in question, in our case RE. The four basic dimensions of any educational programme are (1) the goals or function, (2) the content, (3) the structure, and (4) the methods used (Barnhardt 1981); together, these form a curriculum. However, it is important to re-emphasise that a curriculum might work differently in different national contexts and that education and the interpretation of a curriculum finally rests upon the quality and the understanding of the teachers in the classroom.

Studies within the field of curriculum theory have adopted several approaches to analysing the curriculum (cf. Eisner and Vallance 1974; Englund 2005; Lundgren 1981).

The present study is exclusively concerned with analysing the curriculum in the *formulation arena*, in this case the curriculum texts for RE within the prescribed current curriculum. For our analysis, we employ four broad knowledge traditions from Deng and Luke (2008, 66–87, see also Wahlström 2015, 36–49) of what is considered important knowledge and thus construct the dominant discourse in each curriculum. These dominant curriculum traditions or discourses are referred to as 1) *academic rationalism* where subject-based knowledge is considered as most important, and therefore the canon in the academic subjects is the starting point 2) a *social efficient* curriculum where knowledge considered important for a future citizen is valued the most 3) a *humanistic* curriculum where knowledge that contributes to the individual student's personal development is valued the most, and 4) a *social reconstructivist* curriculum, where the social and political potential of the curriculum is emphasised.

Literacy and literacies

The concept of literacy, however contested (Street and Lefstein 2007, 34–47), has gained an increasingly prominent place in educational research, and we meet different combinations of this in terms like numerical literacy, aesthetic literacy, linguistic literacy, visual literacy and computer literacy in the literature. The terms literacy and critical literacy encompasses interdisciplinary research traditions in education where different theoretical and methodological approaches come into use. Paulo Freire's work from the late 1960s and beyond is fundamental to this perspective (cf. Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). In addition, Brian Street (2005), Ivanič (2009), Hilary Janks (2010, 2017), Peter Freebody (2010, 2013) and Gee (2011, 2015) can be mentioned as some of the more central representatives of the scholarly literacy tradition.

The concept of literacy is now also widely used by the OECD to drive key competences as a framework for the various studies of OECD such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress in Reading Literacy Study). Key competences for literacy are within the OECD frameworks developed in three categories: (1) using tools interactively, (2) interacting in heterogeneous groups, and (3) acting autonomously. These competencies are, in turn, connected to the need for developing literacy within three different fields according to OECD: (1) reading literacy, (2) mathematical literacy, and (3) scientific literacy (Englund 2012, 30–31; OECD 2018). These three literacy fields mentioned by OECD are sometimes criticised for being overly narrow and that other competences ‘to create meaning in a world where different perspectives occur are needed’ (cf. Englund 2012, 32). Thus, critics see how the discourse of literacy emphasises competences and paves the way for comparing, testing, and controlling between competing nations, which is more difficult with a more complex concept such as knowledge (Lundgren 2006, 69–70).

Religious literacy

In education, all content area curricula mobilise literacy models or theories of how students should read, write, speak, think, and listen in a given subject; these models, in turn, are bound up with educators’ view on the subject. Such models in RE can be termed *religious literacy*, which is a concept that has been in use since the 1990s. The concept of religious literacy has been employed by, among others, von Brömssen (2013); Conroy (2016), Dinham (2016b), Dinham and Francis (2015), Dinham and Shaw (2017), Franken (2017), Goldburg (2010), Moore (2007, 2019), Papen (2005), Prothero (2008), Richardson (2017), Sahin (2017), Shaw (2019) and Wright (1993, 2000, 2004, 2010, 2015) and very recently by Muhammed Azeem Ashraf (2019) and Chan et al. (2019). These researchers come from various national, as well as different scientific traditions in relation to researching religion, religious literacy and education.

So how can the concept of religious literacy be defined? One of the first researchers to use the concept was Andrew Wright, who defined religious literacy as ‘the ability, and inability, to reflect, communicate and act in an informed, intelligent and sensitive manner towards the phenomenon of religion’ (Wright 1993, 47). Wright later introduced the concepts of ‘spiritual literacy,’ ‘religious and theological literacy,’ and ‘critical spiritual literacy’ (Wright 2000, 2004, 2010, 2015).

A much-used definition of religious literacy is that of Diane L. Moore, who runs the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School. Her definition has also been adopted by the American Academy of Religion to help educators understand what is required for a basic understanding of religion and its roles in human experience.² Moore’s definition is:

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.³

This definition emphasises an understanding of the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which religious traditions develop. This approach is also something Moore underlines in the text on her web page⁴ as she states that ‘Critical to this definition is the importance of understanding religions and religious influences *in context* and as *inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience*.’⁵ Moore also takes a ‘cultural studies approach’ in her 2007 book entitled ‘Overcoming Religious Illiteracy. A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education.’ A slightly different way of formulating the concept religious literacy can be found in Richardson (2017). He views religious literacy, based on readings of several scholars, as ‘an individual and social good, from the ability of individuals to make informed choices about the beliefs that influence their moral understandings, to the moral goods of increasing understanding respect and tolerance, and responsible political and civic engagement’ (Richardson 2017, 364). Adam Dinham⁶ reflects about religious literacy as ‘a degree of general knowledge about at least some religious traditions and beliefs’ and ‘the confidence to find out about others’. Dinham further discusses religious literacy in four steps, arguing that religious literacy contains knowledge of the concept of religion, as well as an understanding of the concept secular. The concept of religious literacy, according to Dinham, has a meaning of understanding the religious landscape, and how to think critically about it. Furthermore, it is important to address one’s disposition: what emotional and deeply held assumptions are brought to the conversation and what are the effects of these deep positions?⁷ Dinham (2016a) suggests that religious literacy can be understood in terms of a) category, b) disposition, c) knowledge and d) skills as a kind of religious literacy model. However, Dinham also recognises that the knowledge needed will differ along with the context (cf. Shaw 2019).

These somewhat different, but very alike understandings of the concept of religious literacy are in line with several of the above-mentioned literacy research traditions at large. Yet, and as mentioned above, educational and religious traditions develop in certain historical, social, political, and cultural contexts and must keep a reasonably even pace with their society (cf. Saelid Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2003). Thus, it is especially interesting to explore RE curricula for different national settings and explore these with the help of the concept of religious literacy. To our knowledge, few researchers have interrogated assumptions on religious literacy in a comparative way; that is, comparing RE curricula and their assumptions about the main purpose, objectives, contents, skills, and attitudes. Furthermore, what do the intended outcomes in religious literacy tell us about the particular society in which it should be learnt and about the conditions for the RE subject today?

Material and methodological considerations

The empirical data used for this article are the curricula for RE from three national settings of education. Thus, for this work, only text material in the form of curriculum texts was used. In curriculum theoretical work, such texts are developed and used within what is called the formulation arena, as mentioned above. It is in the formulation arena that the selection processes and negotiations in education policy lead to the formulas of the governing documents for the school (Linde 2012). Thus, we have not been researching enacted curricula in classroom settings. It is worth noting again that curriculum texts are used in various ways in different educational contexts, due to regulations and policies

in national and/or local contexts of education. Furthermore, the organisational models of compulsory education play an important role in how curricula are constructed (see f. ex. Eurydice 2014).

In the following part of this article, three different curricula will be analysed: the curriculum for Catholic RE for Primary Schools in Austria and the curricula for RE in Scotland and Sweden respectively. The three countries were chosen because they place themselves in historical and social different spaces in Europe with different histories and religious, educational, and language traditions.⁸ The Catholic curriculum for Primary Schools in Austria was chosen because the Catholic tradition is the dominant religious tradition in Austria (59 percent), and the Scottish and the Swedish curricula are the national curricula in those two countries. The curricula will be analysed from the four research questions mentioned above, drawing on a critical discourse analytical (CDA) approach used by, among others, Taylor (2004) and Rogers (2004) in education and Hjelm in the study of religion (2014). From a discourse theoretical perspective, policy making, in this case, curriculum construction, is seen as an arena of struggle over meaning and policies are seen as the outcomes of struggles (Pinar 2012; Taylor 2004, 3). For the analysis we have searched and interpreted the structures of the content, phrases, argumentations and specific ideologically shaped words in the curricula texts to locate dominant discourses as exemplified and underlined in the article.

A short background of the context for RE in each of the national contexts is given, followed by analysis example of each of the curricula.

The background and context of RE in Austria

The religious dimension of education as a task of the school is constitutionally anchored in Austria and administered by churches and religious communities in the school (Franken 2017, 111). There are two lessons per class with a minimum of 10 attendants (fewer pupils mean a reduction to one lesson). Children have the right to withdraw from RE within the first five days of a school year. Pupils over the age of 14 can opt out themselves. Legally opting out from RE must happen on grounds of conscience, but in practice it is evident that there are other reasons for not attending (inconvenient time-tables, lack of interest, etc.), which has led to a book on research on RE in Austria being entitled ‘Reli oder Kaffehaus?’ [‘Religion class, or the café’], (Ritzer 2003). The number of pupils who attend RE lessons has dropped in the last few years while the number of children without religious affiliation has increased dramatically. These pupils can enrol for the RE of a Christian denomination in the form of an optional subject.

In Austria, RE is taught separately for Free Church, Alevi, Orthodox, Muslim and Jewish attendants, with different curricula determined by the respective churches and religious communities who also approve textbooks, prepare teachers and issue special teaching permits for RE (Franken 2017, 111; Rothgangel and Schelander 2018, 303). Schools generally offer Roman Catholic and Protestant RE; Islamic, Orthodox, Jewish and Buddhist RE lessons take place in schools with a significant number of respective pupils. New religious communities (NRM) were officially recognised in 2013, also wanting to establish their own RE.

Influenced by the high rate of pupils who do not attend RE any longer, some schools established a pilot project called ‘Ethics’ in order to offer an alternative. The advantage is that pupils can decide whether to attend RE or Ethics. On the other hand, Ethics constitutes a competitor for RE. At the moment, a new approach is being developed and tested in selected schools mainly in Vienna: RE as a subject in joint responsibility of the Christian churches, where a RE teacher from one of the main Christian denominations teaches the complete group of Christian pupils in a particular class (Ivkovits 2018).

An analysis of the catholic RE curriculum in Austria

In the first paragraph in ‘The Christian Catholic Curriculum for Religious Education in Roman Catholic Schools’ for primary schools in Austria,⁹ which is entitled ‘The educational and teaching tasks of RE’, the construction of the subject is formulated as a separate subject of instruction.¹⁰ This is understood in the curriculum ‘as a service to the students and the school’ as it ‘contributes to the fulfilment of the educational mission of the Austrian school by: promoting ethical, religious and moral values.’ Under the heading of ‘The Importance of Catholic Religious Education for Individuals’ it is stated that:

Religious competence enables people to consciously deal with their own lives and their big questions: What can I know? What should I do? What can I hope for? What is the human? [...] This opens ways to find meaning. Religious education thus promotes the personal development of the students.¹¹

The personal development is distinctly emphasised as follows in this quotation from the curriculum:

In Catholic religious education, students are encouraged and as far as possible empowered to make their personal religious decisions in freedom and to be able to orient and shape their lives accordingly. Religious education is thus in the tradition of structured and intellectually responsible reflection of the Christian faith, without wanting to impose this belief on others.

The relevance of RE for the state and society is formulated in this curriculum as follows:

Addressing one’s own background and belonging to the church should help Catholic students to build an identity that facilitates an open-minded approach to the other. It also requires an engagement with other religions, worldviews, cultures and trends that today – often competing – shape our plural world. It is both an ability to recognize people with different beliefs, as well as, if necessary, the competence for substantiated argumentation.

The curriculum explicitly use the term ‘religious competence’ and claims that RE promotes this. The curriculum states that:

- Catholic religious education promotes religious competence. Pupils acquire these through the experience-related discussion with
- people and their orientation towards life
- religion in society and culture
- the reference to learned and lived religion
- religious and philosophical diversity in worldviews

These four competences are further clarified through ten competences that the Catholic RE in Austria should develop. The first competence is formulated as the competence ‘To perceive your own self-understanding and understanding of the world as well as personal beliefs and to express them in conversation’ and the second one is to ‘Perceive the experiences of life and interpret them in the light of Christian hope.’

As can be seen from the above quotations, the Catholic curriculum for RE in Austria is clearly articulated within a confessional or denominational structure, with the aim of developing and empowering students in their own personal religious decisions; that is, in a Christian Catholic tradition. In fact, it is stated initially that the education is ‘a service’ and that the mission of the school is ‘to promote ethical, religious and moral values’. The curriculum is formulated within a theory of personal identity formation, where the pupil should initially get to know their own background and tradition; that is, ‘perceive the experiences of life and interpret them in the light of Christian hope’. The content that follows in the curriculum is completely considered in relation to the Christian faith tradition; namely, Holy Scriptures, the meaning of Jesus, and the guiding themes of Christianity, as well as church spaces and the most important Christian festivals. The verbs used to describe skills in the curriculum are perceive, understand, know, discover, describe, and explore, which points to varied ways of learning. However, all learning is related to the Catholic religious tradition, underlined with the second goal, which states that the experiences of life should be perceived and interpreted ‘in the light of Christian hope’. Another goal the students should be able to capture is ‘to express them [the Catholic tradition] in conversation’. However, the diversity in religions and worldviews is also expressed, but significantly later in the text, that pupils should ‘discover diversity in Europe as enrichment and challenge’. Interestingly, the word ‘competing’ is put forward in relation to ‘other religions, worldviews, cultures and trends,’ as well as ‘the competence for substantiated argumentation’. The curriculum describes other religions and worldviews as often competitively shaping our world.

When summarising the religious literacy within the curriculum for Catholic RE in Austria, we ascertain that it strongly emphasises personal fulfilment through Christian Catholic faith and that Catholic RE as a separate school subject is one of the means to reach this, together with the ability and willingness to communicate with those of other faiths and non-believers. It provides the context where a religious conviction can be developed and, within one’s own faith and the corresponding religious tradition, together with other Catholic students identity building can be reasoned. In other words, being religiously literate first and foremost means to perceive and describe, understand and interpret, shape and act, communicate, assess and judge, participate and decide on the basis of the Catholic faith and thus to be able to articulate oneself as a Catholic Christian. Religious diversity is downplayed, and a global perspective is somewhat neglected. Thus, it is predominantly a Christian Catholic monolingual religious literacy that is constructed in the Austrian Catholic RE curriculum, planned for teaching and learning in a mono-religious space in the school. Nevertheless, ecumenical and interreligious concerns have a place in the curricula, which can be seen as a way of embracing diversity from within the mono-religious space. Education in RE is primarily understood as a ‘means of personal fulfilment’ which points towards a conceptualisation of the curriculum as humanistic and into a given faith tradition.

The background and context of RE in Scotland

The Scottish Education Act 1872 created a national system of compulsory elementary schools. Prior to this, the churches had financed the Scottish parish school system (Nixon 2016, 6–19; Tinker 2017, 189–190). However, the churches could no longer support the burgeoning school populations of the late 19th century and the state intervened. This legislation effectively sanctioned the creation of a non-denominational school curriculum with religious instruction as an appendix. However, the 1872 Act also furnished schools with a statement of support for religious instruction and religious Observance. It also provided the first mention of a conscience clause for parents, giving them the right to withdraw their child from religious instruction. To this day, the 1872 Act provides the legislative framework for non-denominational RE in Scottish schools. By 1918, the Catholic schools in Scotland were brought under the Educational Act whilst preserving their own Roman Catholic faith ethos (Tinker 2017, 189).

An analysis of the non-denominational RME curriculum in Scotland

The Scottish curriculum is called ‘Curriculum for Excellence’¹² and the name of the subject in question is ‘Religious and Moral Education, Experiences and outcomes’ (RME).¹³ This curriculum takes account of Scotland’s history as there are three separate sections in the curriculum: one for Religious and moral education and religious education in Roman Catholic schools within Curriculum for Excellence (section 1 in the curriculum), one section for Religious and moral education in non-denominational schools based on the non-confessional, educational principles (section 2 in the curriculum) whereby pupils engage in personal search for meaning and beliefs, laid out in the seminal ‘Miller Report of 1972’ (Scottish Education Department 1972), and one section for Religious Education in Roman Catholic schools.¹⁴

RME is a mandatory part of the 3–18 curriculum and one of 8 curricular areas. Progress and achievement are assessed and reported on in the same way as it is for other subject areas in Scottish schools. The curriculum for the non-denominational schools will be analysed here as this group of schools is in the majority (85 percent are non-denominational. See Nixon 2016). RME as a subject can be described as integrative (Alberts 2007) as students share the same classroom regardless of personal relation to the subject. However, parents have a legal right to withdraw their children from RME if they feel the curriculum conflicts with their own beliefs. In practice, very few parents feel the need to do so (Nixon 2016). The RME curriculum is constructed within three overarching themes: Christianity, world religions selected for study, and development of beliefs and values.

The non-denominational Scottish curriculum for RME articulates that it provides students with the opportunity to consider and develop their own beliefs vis-à-vis the stimuli of a wide range of wisdom traditions, religions and world views. Within this approach religion is featured as ‘a human experience’ and where students have to study both religious and non-religious views. The content that is mentioned first in the text and attributed to the first theme is ‘Christianity,’ comprising Christian and Biblical stories, teachings of Jesus and other figures in Christianity, Christian beliefs about God, Jesus, the human condition and the natural world, and how these beliefs lead to actions for Christians. Christian values and morality also have a significant place in the curriculum, stating that these reflections should be extended to the

Scottish, as well as to the global context. This is framed as ‘I can explain how the values of Christianity contribute to as well as challenge Scottish and other societies’.

In the second theme, ‘World religions selected for study’, the content put forward is the study of world religions and beliefs and values based upon religious or other positions. The third theme covers content such as understanding of what is fair and unfair, developing an awareness of diversity of belief in modern Scotland, as well as understanding values such as honesty, respect, and compassion and how these values might be applied in relation to moral issues. This is articulated as follows in the curriculum:

I am able to apply my understanding of a range of moral viewpoints, including those which are independent of religion, to specific moral issues and am aware of the diversity of moral viewpoints held in modern Scotland and the wider world.

As seen from the above quotations, Christianity is singled out and put forward within what can be called a cultural heritage perspective in the content of the curriculum. This is distinguishable from formulations such as ‘Christianity and the world religions selected for study’ and ‘recognising the place of Christianity in the Scottish context’.

Competences that students should acquire are pronounced through verbs such as apply, recognise, learn about and from, explore and develop, investigate and understand, establish, make, reflect, discern, think critically and act, all in relation to religion and moral. Interestingly, establish as a rather strong verb is used twice in relation to that students should ‘establish values such as wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity’ and ‘establish a firm foundation for lifelong learning, further learning and adult life’. A discourse of lifelong learning comes through, which is specific in the Scottish curriculum of the curricula compared here. Words like ‘action’, ‘lifelong learning’ and the setting ‘I can apply my developing understanding of morality to consider a range of moral dilemmas in order to find ways which could promote a more just and compassionate society’ points towards a social reconstructionist curriculum, where the social and political of the curriculum is emphasised (Deng and Luke 2008). While diversity in society is mentioned in the curriculum, it is not very strongly advocated. However, the RME curriculum states that the education enables the student to ‘recognise and understand religious diversity and the importance of religion in society.’

Specific attitudes that should be developed in studying RME include: developing respect for others and an understanding of their beliefs and values, understanding what is fair and unfair, why caring and sharing are important, developing an awareness that there is a diversity of belief in modern Scotland, and understanding values such as honesty, respect, and compassion.

In summary, we find that the non-denominational Scottish RME curriculum stands in quite a strong social reconstructionist tradition, calling for a just pluralistic society. Actually, it is articulated that reflections on the RME issues ‘might lead to changes in society’. This RE curriculum also stands in the tradition of a distinctly moral curriculum tradition, with clear articulations of educating students into becoming moral citizens (Linde 2012; cf. McKinney and McCluskey 2016).

The background and context of RE in Sweden

Religious education has a long history in Swedish schools. Since 1962, the teaching has been non-denominational (Osbeck and Skeie 2014). The current compulsory school

subject religious education, with the name ‘Knowledge in Christianity’ should, according to the School Law, be neutral in relation to different religions and worldviews (The School Law, 2010:800, 6§). RE in Sweden is a mandatory part of the curriculum through all grades, but is given rather limited time in the curriculum. Today’s RE in elementary school is allocated 35 minutes of teaching per week, given that the schedule for the social sciences subjects is evenly distributed over the nine school years and the four subjects (Osbeck and Skeie, 2014). Progress and achievement is assessed and reported on in the same way as it is for other subject areas. Swedish RE can be called integrative, like Scottish RE (Alberts 2007), as students share the same classroom regardless of their personal relation to the subject. The option for students to opt out from RE education was removed in 1997. Because the RE teaching was considered to be neutral, the view was that opting out was no longer considered necessary (Larsson 2006, 141–163).

An analysis of the RE curriculum in Sweden

The view is currently that RE in Sweden is a subject based on a religious study approach, comparable with any other humanistic or social science subject in School. In the curriculum of Swedish non-confessional RE,¹⁵ it is initially stated that:

Teaching should take as its starting point a view of society characterized by openness regarding lifestyle, outlooks on life, differences between people, and also give students the opportunity to develop a preparedness for understanding and living in a society characterized by diversity (Lgr 11).

Thus, a societal dimension is strong in the curriculum, underlining a diverse society and diverse outlooks on life as the starting point and, in part, a motivation for teaching RE. In the introductory text below, the overarching aim of RE for the students in compulsory school is formulated as follows:

Teaching in religion should essentially give students the opportunities to develop their ability to:

analyse Christianity, other religions and other outlooks on life, as well as different interpretations and use of these, analyse how religions affect and are affected by conditions and events in society, reflect over life issues and their own and other’s identity, reason and discuss moral issues and values based on ethical concepts and models, and search for information about religions and other outlooks on life and evaluate the relevance and credibility of sources (Lgr 11, 176).

Thus, Swedish RE is formulated as a secular and plural subject in which ‘religions and other outlooks on life, religion and society, identity and life issues and ethics’ should be studied. Even so, the curriculum points at the start of the text towards students’ abilities to ‘analyse Christianity, other religions and other outlooks on life’.

As in the Scottish curriculum, there is a cultural heritage perspective built into the Swedish RE curriculum, where Christianity is singled out and mentioned first in the text. This actually makes the formulations of ‘other religions and other outlooks on life’ an othering discourse and suggests that these worldviews are considered as somewhat secondary. Another competing discourse is established through the repetition of the word ‘different’ in the sentences ‘how people with different religious traditions live with and express their religion and belief in different ways,’ and can thus also be said to

contribute to the othering discourse. Thus, the dominant, normalised and most established discourse relates to Christianity, even though the approach in RE should be neutral, according to the Swedish School Law.

The competences put forward in this RE curriculum are analyse (twice), reflect, reason, and search, which points to a quite analytical curriculum, where students are positioned distant in their studies. For example, ethics should be studied based on ethical concepts and models and is not mentioned in relation to the students themselves. Attitudes such as tolerance and respect for other's world views are stressed as important and are also highlighted among 'the fundamental values of the school'.¹⁶

The focus in the Swedish RE curriculum is clearly on knowledge and analysis of different beliefs, not primarily on supporting the personal development of the student's own thoughts and existential understanding of life (cf. Selander 2011). Using the definitions from Deng and Luke (2008) we consider the current Swedish RE curriculum to be categorised as an academic rationalist curriculum. In such a curriculum, the concern is to make students use and appreciate the ideas and works that constitute the various intellectual disciplines; in this case, the academic discipline and the canon in religious studies aimed at a primarily scientific understanding of the world.

Discussion

The concept of religious literacy has become common, not the least in educational discourses. Theories of literacies have been assigned to reading and writing script, but more recent scholarship in literacy challenge such restrictions. Such a development has brought about the concept of literacy to be widely used by the OECD to drive key competences as a framework for the various studies of OECD. Yet, the OECD understanding of the concept literacy can be challenged as being too narrow, where proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving seem more related to economical discourses than to critically investigations on human life and society. It seems as the concept of literacy as used by Paulo Freire has been really marginalised. Therefore it is interesting to relate literacy to curriculum work, in this case literacy in relation to three different national curricula in RE, exploring the dominating religious literacy within these curricula.

Thus, for the analysis we have searched and interpreted the purpose, structures of the content, phrases, argumentations and specific ideologically shaped words in the curricula texts to locate dominant discourses in RE. Our analysis shows in general, that even if the curricula all contain the name RE, they differ significantly in the construction of religious literacy depending on the national context.

The Austrian curriculum offers the context in which religious conviction can be developed and substantiated through one's faith and the corresponding religious tradition along with other students of the same denomination. Religious competence therefore primarily means perceiving and describing, understanding and interpreting shaping and acting, communicating, evaluating and judging, participating and deciding based on one's faith to be able to articulate oneself as a Catholic Christian. Religious diversity is still marginalised and a global perspective is barely apparent in the text. It is clearly articulated within a denominational structure, aiming to strengthen the students in their personal religious decisions within a Christian, in this case Catholic, tradition and to develop necessary competences for this purpose. First, it clarifies that education

is 'a service' and that one of the tasks of the school is 'the promotion of ethical, religious and moral values'. The curriculum is based on a theory of personal formation in which pupils reflect on their background and get to know their own tradition, i.e. 'perceive their life experiences and interpret them in the light of the Christian hope'. The concept that follow in the curriculum explicitly refers to the Christian faith tradition, namely the Holy Scripture, the significance of Jesus and the central themes of Christianity as well as the religious buildings and the most important Christian festivals. From a socio-cultural perspective, RE aims to support students to develop their religious identity by allowing them to participate in religious practices. The Austrian curriculum for Catholic RE for primary school emphasises personal fulfilment through Christian Catholic faith and constructs a mono-religious space for a predominantly mono-religious literacy. Nevertheless, ecumenical and inter-religious concerns have their place in the curriculum, which constitutes a possibility to perceive diversity from a mono-religious perspective.

The aim of the Scottish RE subject 'Religious and Moral Education, Experiences and Outcomes' on the other hand is the development of students' religious and moral literacy in a very clear social reconstructionist curriculum. It is mentioned in the curriculum that students should be able to apply an understanding of morality to consider a range of moral dilemmas in order to find ways which can promote a more just and compassionate society. The Scottish RME-subject is non-denominational, with the aim of providing all students with the opportunity to consider and develop their own beliefs vis-à-vis a wide range of traditions, religions and world views. Religion is here featured as 'a human experience' and the students have then to study both religious and non-religious views. However, Christianity is singled out and mentioned first in the curriculum, pointing to its significance in the Scottish tradition. The moral dimension is very clearly emphasised through the wordings of 'being able to apply an understanding of morality [...] in order to find ways which could promote a more just and compassionate society'.

The current Swedish curriculum stands out as being academic rationalistic, with the aim of developing a rather distanced and analytic religious literacy in order to understand the world based on a scientific basis. The competences that are put forward in the Swedish RE curriculum are analyse, reflect, reason, and search, which are clear analytical competences and students can position themselves rather distant to their learning. Moreover, ethics should be studied based on ethical concepts and models and is not mentioned in relation to the students themselves. Also here, Christianity is singled out and mentioned first as in the Scottish curriculum, as it is stated as the basis for Swedish traditions. The Swedish RE subject is supposed to be 'neutral' which can be challenged as it is embedded in a Christian contextual understanding of religion and religious traditions. The word 'different' is repeated in the curriculum as for example in 'different religious traditions' and in 'different ways'. These wordings produces rather strong otherings, which counteract the stated purpose in the Swedish curriculum that teaching should be multicultural and multireligious.

In sum, we can see that RE in Europe, by the examples of curricula from Austria, Scotland and Sweden, articulate rather different religious literacies for teaching and learning in the RE subject. Not only the denominational or non-denominational character make a difference, but also educational traditions such as academic rationalism or social reconstructionism play

a part in this. This means that religious literacy are variously configured and reconfigured in terms of the context out of which they are prescribed in the curriculum.

Notes

1. The terms curriculum and curricula (plur.) refer in this text to the knowledge, skills or qualifications that are intended to be passed on from one generation to another. A curriculum is usually laid down in national documents, works as a prescriptive text, and lasts for several (many) years. For further discussion of the definition, also in comparison to the term syllabus, see, for example, Pinar et al. (1995, 25–28).
2. Harvard Divinity School. Religious Literacy Project. <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/definition-religious-literacy>. Retrieved [191209].
3. <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/definition-religious-literacy>. [Retrieved 191209].
4. <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/definition-religious-literacy>. [Retrieved 191209].
5. <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/definition-religious-literacy>. [Retrieved 191209].
6. Professor Adam Dinham, Goldsmiths, University of London, initiated the project ‘The Religious Literacy in Higher Education’ in England and Wales in 2010.
7. <http://www.onreligion.co.uk/what-is-religious-literacy-qa-with-adam-dinham/> [2019-09-03].
8. The three countries were also chosen as all three authors were part of the READY- project, ‘Religious Education and Diversity’, a three year Erasmus+-project sharing experiences of teacher education in Austria, England, Germany, Scotland and Sweden. See: <http://www.readyproject.eu/> [Retrieved 20200123].
9. https://www.schulamt.at/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Volksschule_LP_2014.pdf [Retrieved 20200309].
10. i. cf. Austrian Federal Constitutional Law Art.14 Sect. 5a; School Organisation Act § 2; European Convention on Human Rights Art 2. 1st Supplementary Protocol. [Retrieved 180529].
11. Emphasis added by the authors in order to point to specific content, words, phrases and concepts of the dominant discourse.
12. A Curriculum For Excellence by the Curriculum Review Group. The Scottish Government. 1 November 2004. <https://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20180129151957/http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2004/11/20178/45862>. [Retrieved 191209].
13. <https://education.gov.scot/Documents/rme-eo.pdf>. [Retrieved 191209].
14. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/curriculum-for-excellence-religious-and-moral-education/> [Retrieved 200229].
15. <https://www.skolverket.se/publikationsserier/styrdokument/2018/curriculum-for-the-compulsory-school-preschool-class-and-school-age-educare-revised-2018?id=3984> [Retrieved 191209].
16. The fundamental values of the Swedish school in the current curriculum are ‘the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are the values that the school should represent and impart’. See: Lgr 11 and Lgy 11, <https://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=3984> [Retrieved 191209].

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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